

SCIAF factsheets

racism...

Racism and its roots

Racism is treating one group of people less favourably than another because of colour, religious belief, or ethnic origin. It was once widely held that human beings belonged to different "races" of people, which were defined according to physical characteristics. Racism is rooted in the belief that some "races" are superior to others. Feelings of racial superiority led Europeans to colonise countries in Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean, and exploit their economies.

Scientists now agree that there is only one race - the human race. However, racist attitudes are still used to victimise and oppress people from "ethnic minorities" - that is, people with a different nationality, religion, language, or cultural background from the majority.

Racism is based on prejudice or discrimination. Prejudice means pre-judging, or taking a strong dislike to someone for no good reason. Prejudices are opinions we form without knowing the full facts, and they usually come out of ignorance. Discrimination means acting on a prejudice.

Britain - home to people from many different cultures

At different times throughout history, people from many parts of the world have come to Britain and settled here.

The first Jews arrived more than 1,000 years ago and Irish people came fleeing famine in 1840s, and looking for work in the 1950s.

Between the 15th and the 19th centuries, thousands of Africans were brought to Britain as slaves or servants of the wealthy. People from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Caribbean were invited after World War II to do the jobs for which there were too few British workers.

A multicultural society

Britain today is a multicultural society, with a host of people from ethnic minorities making important contributions to every area of life in Britain.

A few facts about the make up of Britain's population ...

According to the 1991 census, 5.5% of the population in Britain are from ethnic minorities, of which the largest group is Irish.

Almost 50% of Britain's ethnic minority population were born here; about 75% are British citizens.

Apart from English, 13 other languages are spoken by at least 100,000 people: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Polish, Punjabi, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu, and Welsh.

The Experience of Racism

Racism can be experienced personally, through jokes, graffiti, abuse and violence from other people. It can also be experienced institutionally - that is, by the discrimination of a society's laws and social policies, such as being denied access to education, jobs, housing, and other services.

When people from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia arrived in Britain during the 1940s, they were confronted with open hostility. In the late 1940s, for example, people put up signs saying "No Blacks, No Irish, No dogs". Black and Asian people were often subjected to name-calling and physical attacks, and many landlords and landladies refused to rent rooms to them. And all because they were "different". Things like this still happen today.

Racism in Britain Today

In a 1991, survey of 400 ethnic minority households in Preston, 74% said that at least one member had experienced racial harassment in the previous two years.

Black people in Britain are twice as likely to be jobless as white people, and when they have a job, it is more likely to be low-paid, semi-skilled or unskilled work.

Racism and the Law

The 1976 Race Relations Act makes racial discrimination unlawful. The law, however, cannot do a lot about prejudice - how people think or feel about others. The Commission for Racial Equality was set up to enforce the Race Relations Act. The 86 Racial Equality Councils around the country give support and advice to people who are discriminated against.

Gift or threat?

Growing up in multicultural societies gives everyone the chance to experience the rich diversity of human life

and different ways of looking at the world. Here are just a few of the things that people from other places have brought to Britain...

Religion - Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and, long ago, even Christianity itself.

Music and dance - Caribbean calypso and reggae; bhangra and many other styles from Asia; a huge range of African music; and soul, blues and jazz from the Black American tradition.

Food - from curries to kebabs, stir-fries to pizzas, and a host of exotic fruit and vegetables.

Clothes - the different textures, colours and styles of clothes from other cultures, and their influence on high-street fashions.

SCIAF's Role

SCIAF promotes human development throughout the developing world. This is done through community-based projects that aim to benefit people regardless of their ethnic origin, colour, creed or ideology. SCIAF provides educational materials for schools that celebrate the diversity of the world's peoples and cultures.

What you can do

Look out for programmes and adverts on TV and radio that cast black and Asian people in stereotyped roles. Write to The Broadcasting Complaints Commissions (35 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0DF) if you think a television or radio programme is racially offensive.

Look out for stories, cartoons, and pictures in newspapers that give negative images of ethnic communities. Write to the editor, stating clearly what you thought was racist.

Read newspapers written by African-Caribbeans, such as *The Voice* and *The Journal*, and take a look at the *New Internationalist* October 1994 issue on "Race".

Watch films about the problems and effects of racism, such as *Cry Freedom*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Mississippi Burning*, *The Colour Purple*, and *A Dry white season*.

If there are people in your class at school with a different cultural background from yours, find out where they are from, or where their parents are from, and whether they keep customs, festivals, or traditions from their culture.

Find out about people who have battled against racism, such as the African anti-slavery campaigner Olaudah Equiano (1745-97) and the US civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jnr (1929-68).

SCIAF would like to express its gratitude to CAFOD for giving permission to reproduce this factsheet